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The Air we Breathe

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The Air we Breathe

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MFA Candidate 2019

A thesis submitted to the SMU Meadows School of Art
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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"History is not past, History is the present. We carry our history with us. To think otherwise is criminal."
James Baldwin¹

My *mashq*-based practice engages issues of loss, dislocation, displacement and territoriality through examining the domestic as charged political space. Coming from a tradition of *musawri*² - miniature painting and carpet weaving, I am interested in the formal and conceptual underpinnings of *the grid* - a binary structure of power, which bears, gives form to, and disappears into the composition itself.

Through the process of *Mashq, an interdisciplinary practice*, loosely translated as exercise, repetition or circumambulation- I utilize both references from my immediate surroundings, as well as Indo-Persian history to investigate institutions as a continual colonial legacy. The complexities of my concerns are explored through a cross disciplinary approach of painting, sculpting, performance and video installations. I explore the relation between contrasting mediums, aspiring to mediate static and moving images through an aesthetic that embodies the essence of miniature painting practice.

In this paper I will explain three works that were part of my Graduate Show. Expanding on their relationship to concepts and references made in works that played key role in the development of the works exhibited and highlighting the connections I have made between works produced in the graduate program.

Roof | چھت

Running across eight panels is tessellating Toranj pattern, which at its base is rendered conspicuously into a triangular, white roof. This triangle is painted with two white pigments, titanium and lead, over which vertical lines- evoking the warp of an unfinished carpet- are drawn with copper and silver points, causing the drawing to constantly tarnish, transform and destabilize. Stability lays beyond the fragile roof in the bright colors that form the background (Fig. 1).

I draw to focus and to chase down the ideas that come to me from a myriad of sources. For the most part of my first term, I engaged with what is natural to me, and that is drawing; a simple,

¹ From the documentary: *I am Not Your Negro* (Baldwin 2016).

² The term miniature painting was changed from *fanne-musawri* during the British era and now we associate the whole genera with this term. The Arabic word *fanne-musawri* is one of the 99 names of God that is used self reflexively in the Quran as the curator/artist. This word entered India through Persian language. The local term connects the painter to the Divine archetype of the creator whereas the reductive materialistic term miniature merely describes the art from its physical attributes, whether it refers to its perceived smallness or the pigment miniatum. This text is informed by Murad Khan Mumtaz's paper read for a Symposium - John Lockwood Kipling: The Legacy. (Mumtaz 2017)

straight forward act of pencil or brush on paper. Imagination and intuition further inform my process (Fig. 2).

My life has been one of extensive movement. Born in Iran, brought up both in Iran and Pakistan and after much traveling I have now based myself in Dallas. So, inevitably I long to belong and domestic space is a source I draw from. Home for me is both war and love. The image of a home in my work references my early childhood drawings of houses which strangely present a western European archetype of a house in visual culture: a rectangle with 2 windows, a door, a triangular pitched roof, and a chimney (Fig. 3). Despite the fact that many houses globally do not resemble this form, this image has become a universal symbol for “home,” unconsciously internalized and reproduced by children all over the world. Along with my feminist engagement with and critique of the domestic space, this image of “the house” resonates with postcolonial conditions, particularly questions of cultural imperialism, territoriality, exile and dislocation.

Through this work I investigate what Arundhati Roy questions, what happens when imagination is bombarded and colonized before it even begins to imagine?³ I suppose it begins to symbolize a fragile structure, hopelessly unable to sustain itself, constantly tarnishing, constantly eroding. What happens when a roof that must be a stable structure, capable to shelter and protect its dwellers is actively eroding and tarnishing? The white roof in the painting is in a constant state of tarnishing; an effect I achieve by using techniques used by European masters, known as silver point drawings, on white pigments such as lead, titanium and zinc. This effect at one level signals incarcerated minds that are colonized even before they start thinking, on the other a crumbling architecture of corporatized pedagogy.

I have been reading Angela Mitropoulos's "Contract and Contagion" where she talks about "materialities of infrastructure render it the most pertinent political question there is. Everything else is distraction. Infrastructure is the undercommons – neither the skilled virtuosity of the artisan, nor regal damask, nor the Jacquard Loom that replaced, reproduced and democratized them, but the weave".⁴

She analyzes the House and control of the home as economy. The hierarchical domination based in gender and race of men over the home, the idea of the home, the requirement of subordination to the ideology of the home and then how this idea is circulated and re-produced.

In *Roof/Chaat* (Fig. 1) and *Toranj i and ii* (Fig. 4), I used white paint as a medium conceptually. It represents whiteness - a granular layer which constantly erodes the blacks and grays of silver and copper drawings that lay over it. The layers of white history and knowledge that gives all the other colors a meaning and a position, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay, *Can Subaltern Speak*, writes about the politics around knowledge that it is never innocent. It articulates the interest of its producer and is always tainted by political and economic interests. Hence knowledge is just like any other commodity and has direct ties with economy.

³ (Roy 2016)

⁴ (Mitropoulos 2012).

Westernized knowledge tends to construct identities for the third world people, Europe becomes the ideal. Hence, under this system, we do not construct our identities; we have them written for us.⁵

گفتا من آن ترنجم کاندَر جهان نَگنجم
گفتم به از ترنجی لیکن به دست نایی

“I am the Bergamot Orange”, they said, “which befits not this world”

“Even better than thou”, I replied, “yet unattainable”⁶

A constantly reoccurring motif of Toranj, literally translated as the bergamot in English is sourced from Persian carpets and Indo-Persian miniature paintings. The motif, Toranj is also title of a poem by the 14th century Persian and Sufi poets Kwaju and Hafez, and is a conversation between two people or perhaps God interrogating man. The poem alludes to the status of a bergamot orange as an attribute that is unattainable and unruly. It is believed, when used in Persian carpets, Toranj signifies protection against outsiders.⁷ By using the Toranj pattern, I also return Bergamot to its South-East Asian origins. It is suppose to be a protection against outsiders, but the bergamot orange has become flavor, a scent, and an oil co-opted and branded divorced of its origins by Europe for their own pleasure.

The copper and silver-etched line drawing of a *Toranj-ii* is being constantly tarnished by three white pigments - Lead, titanium, and zinc – that slowly transform and erase the drawing. Standing next to Toranj-i which is a *mashq*- repeated exercise of trying to perfect what stands for the unattainable (Fig. 4).

Projection (working title)

Projection is an interactive video installation in which I used programming to trace viewer's interaction with a projected image on the floor. The original video image, a colorful illuminated medallion (Toranj), shifts over time to be completely subsumed by white paint. The shift is triggered as the viewer comes close to the projection and reverts back to its original when the viewer moves away from it (Fig. 5). This project explores the complex relationship between viewers, patrons, and institutions that engage objects with deep colonial histories. This project

⁵ (Spivak 1994)

⁶ Above is a very loose translation of a verse from the poem Toranj by Kwaju and Hafez

⁷ (Hejazi 2017)

seeks to critique the structural mechanisms of stewardship that affect spectatorship and confer meaning upon displaced diasporic objects through activating viewers to contemplate their own position in the consumption of the "Other". The precarious nature of the image prevents the spectator from being able to view the reproduction up close and in detail. Viewers have to negotiate the distance they will occupy to engage/experience the work.

Moving in and around the old city of Lahore I grew up living in Lime-stone whitewashed spaces. The granularity of thick layers of white on white from schools and houses that I grew up in; to the historic buildings I grew up adoring and later investigating. My reference to this act of whitewashing signals the ongoing intellectual colonialism that supports the projection of Euro-centric knowledge which results in homogenization of cultures.

Projection and *White lie* / سفید جھوٹ, are works that refers to the British regime's practice of repurposing and plastering historic monuments. The still-whitewashed Tomb of Anarkali (Fig. 6). In Lahore—built by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir (Prince Saleem) as a memorial for his lover Anarkali, who was executed in 1599 after accused of having an illicit love affair with young Prince Saleem—served the British Raj as clerical offices (1847), then the Anglican St. James Church (1851), and then the Punjab Record Office (1891). It remains the Punjab Archives, and this is not uncommon as today postcolonial local governments in the sub-continent have often had to continue in the footprints left by the Raj.

White Lie | سفید جھوٹ

The usage and reference of text to my work is multifold, from interest to textual artifacts, manuscripts, historical writings, fiction, lyrics, proverbs and the list goes on.

White lie / سفید جھوٹ, the title is a word play, white lie means menial lie and سفید جھوٹ - literally means white (سفید) lie (جھوٹ) - in Urdu language it refers to a blatant lie. The *White lie* I point towards is in direct contrast to the "white lie" that is intended to prevent harm or made with good intentions. I speak of white (person's) lie that white colonists tell themselves, that they are there to benefit the people that they are colonizing, that what they are doing is saving people from being "uncultured" or even "savage" - the imagined moral superiority and falsification of a kind that is unforgettable. This piece is a two-channel video installation in a room. Upon entering the room, the viewer finds her/himself in the middle on a conversation between two screens on both sides of the room. On the left is *white lie*, in which I am applying white paint concealing what the viewers can see and, on the right, I am removing it, partly revealing myself. At no point in time can a viewer look at both screens simultaneously, the two videos are in conversation with each other, when one applies the other stops and looks and vice versa (Fig. 7).

I constantly refer to this act of whitewashing in my practice. Both *Projection* and *White lie* / سفید جھوٹ, signals an ongoing intellectual colonialism that supports the projection of

Eurocentric knowledge and "mythic systems of representation"⁸ resulting in homogenization of cultures.

Trilogy

My practice weaves painting, performances and moving images in the way they are constructed and rendered. I see my paintings as a very slow motion video, constantly changing and shifting; at the same time my videos have a stillness that is reminiscent of painting. I use a single point of view and bare minimum editing techniques, blurring the boundaries between these disciplines in my practice. In the construction of the visuals, I seek to make complex subjects simple without making them simplistic.

This trilogy is a critique of the concept of whiteness which is not about skin color or even race. It is about willful blindness used to justify white supremacy to defend exploitation, racism and the crimes of Empire⁹. It's about the conditioning of subaltern mind and body to be complicit in performing the labor of keeping that structure intact. The works speak of the assimilation of colonial mindset to a point where the subaltern body becomes part of the structure that continues to sustain the lie of whiteness and its institutions. In the graduate show, the last part of this trilogy-*Sight_Plan*- was displayed which was both conceptually and in effect, an extension of the first two.

This Bridge Called my Back | The Sun Never Sets | Sight _ Plan

1- This Bridge Called my Back

This work was the result of a one week long extensive performance workshop. Coming from a tradition of miniature painting and carpet weaving, my interest lies in the formal and conceptual underpinnings of *the grid* - a binary structure of power, which bears, gives form to, and disappears into the composition itself. Titled after a book, *This Bridge Called my Back*¹⁰ is an anthology of artworks, essays and poems of a self-described group of "radical women of color" first published in 1981. It is a five-channel video installation, in which I am on all fours, balancing on my back, both a bench and a man in five different locations (Fig. 8).

As a South Asian woman, I feel strongly towards Spivak's writings, as she expands the historical research of subaltern studies histories by focusing the experiences of subaltern woman. She

⁸ In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty speaks of Roland Barthes idea that a myth works by making the historical seem "natural" and by historical, Barthes did not mean history written in books because those books were themselves an outcome of mythic systems of representations. (Chakrabarty 2000) Chakrabarty also argues for a turn away from European as the center and European standards as those to which all people are held up to.

⁹ (Hedge 2017)

¹⁰ (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981)

speaks of the impossibility of reclaiming and re-writing history in the western framework as this structure- of whiteness- construct "truth" for us. The British regime's banning of the religious practice of Sati¹¹ is considered "white man saved brown woman from brown men", a statement that created a "truth" that Indians are barbarians and British are civilized and so their rule over Hindustan was justified. Stephan Morton points towards the adverse effects of western writers/feminists writing about sati as: "the benevolent impulse to represent subaltern groups effectively appropriates the voice of subaltern and thereby silences them".¹² Just like the Colonizer that silenced the widow who might choose to die on her husband's funeral, the Western institutions speaking on behalf of the subaltern woman silences her by speaking of her experience. Spivak asserts, "White men do not save brown women from brown men. It is the Indian woman, or indeed the Indian man, who alone can "save" themselves".¹³

The bench in this video represents the structure of power, one that is held in place by a symbiotic relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, it can't be held in place unless both are playing their roles in that system or in that structure. I am balancing both the weight of that structure and the body sitting on top of it. The body on top is also playing a part in this balancing act but is not sharing the weight of the structure or my body.

2- The Sun Never Sets

The Sun Never Sets, a performance I did as part of the temporary collective where I served English daytime tea in seventy-one imperial white fine china tea cups and saucers, accompanied by classic Marie biscuits. The piece was initially taken as a regular refreshment table during the opening where the site was activated by the audience, taking and consuming tea. After a while the site was activated by my body as a performer when I started rinsing all the dirty cups and placing them back in order (Fig. 9).

The symbolic references to seemingly banal and harmless activity of drinking tea refers to the colonial dynamics, 71 tea cups symbolizes 71 years of India-Pakistan partition and post colonialism, I am free- but I'm still washing the white tea cups, still putting them back in order, still continuing the labor of keeping the white structure intact.

3- Sight _ Plan

Sight_Plan is a two-channel video installation which presents two different points of views of a single performance. Displayed on a wall is a monitor in which the viewer encounters the first video, a bird's eye view of tea-stained, imperial white china tea cups being stacked on a white table by an anonymous group of people dressed in white. As the cups pile up, they fall and eventually break, but the stacking continues. The second video, projected on the other side on the wall, is a frontal view of the performance in which I am kneeling down, clad in white,

¹¹ Sati means "good wife" signals duty of a wife to her husband and religion, a former practice in India whereby a widow threw herself on to her husband's funeral pyre.

¹² (Morton 2003)

¹³ (Ross 2009-10)

holding the table upon which the cups are being stacked for the entire duration of the video (Fig. 10).

On the one hand this work speaks of the expected domestic roles that ultimately renders invisible both the body and its labor, and underscores the un-attainability of the domestic ideals. On the other hand, it speaks of invisibilized people and structures of labor in larger society in general. "Invisibility is not a natural state for anyone".¹⁴ I am literally shattering the products of colonialism and the objects and consumables that were so deeply entrenched in "Empire", that they have lost their origins through colonialism and have become symbols of the colonizers. Neither porcelain nor tea was European products, and yet the quintessential British act is drinking tea out of fine china. Tea is now British. And despite it holding onto the place-name from where it came, china is apparently British as well—a symbol of finery.

Conclusion:

What is the work really about? To sum it up I like how Arundhati Roy talks about her writings:

Of course, as a novelist, I never want to write about "issues" like "the Indian family." What I want to write about is the air we breathe. These days, I feel that novels are becoming kind of domesticated. You know? They have a title, and a theme, and they are branded just like NGOs: you writing on gender, you writing on caste, you are writing on whatever. But for me, the fact is that these are not "issues" - this is the air we breathe."¹⁵

My practice at its core is sourced from the "air we breathe". It speaks of both an intimate, contemplative, and personal space as it meditates power, hierarchies and structures. It speaks of the uncomfortable because discomfortable is the air I breath.

As an artist of color, a woman, a mother, a wife, an immigrant, a transnational, an Iranian, a Pakistani, an Iranian- Pakistani American, a woman artist, a South-Asian, a South-Asian American, a heterosexual Muslim woman and so forth, there are plenty of categories to wade through. I have learned that categories are inevitable. The real issue is how the work navigates the various categories. Art for me is a platform where I make sense of the world around me and to confront uncertainty, hierarchies, and misrepresentations of today. I do so by on the one hand firmly grounding my roots in training as a traditional artist as opposed to allowing it to be supplanted and on the other hand challenging Western art standards or even subverting them by using their materials and methods in order to demonstrate their colonialism.

¹⁴ (Yamada 2002)

¹⁵ (Asokan 2017)



Figure 1

Roof | چہت , Gouache and silver point on paper, set of eight panels 15"x22" each, 2019

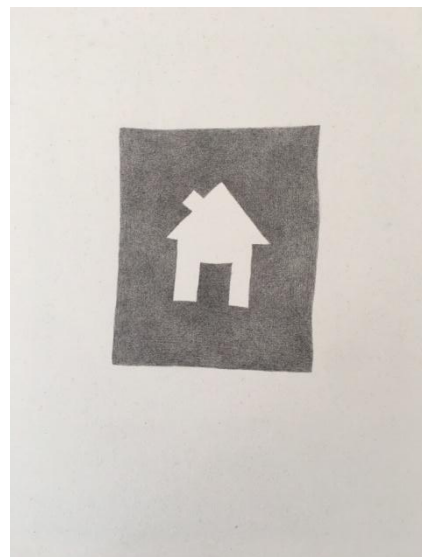
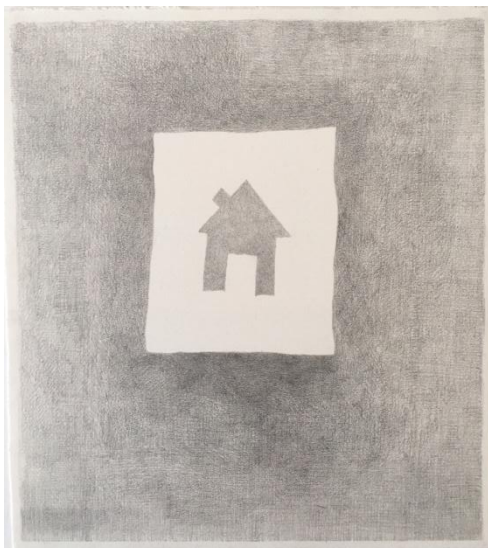


Figure 2

War Mannequins, diptych graphite on paper, 8"x10" each, 2017



Figure 3

House, Gouache on board, 6"x6"x4", 2017

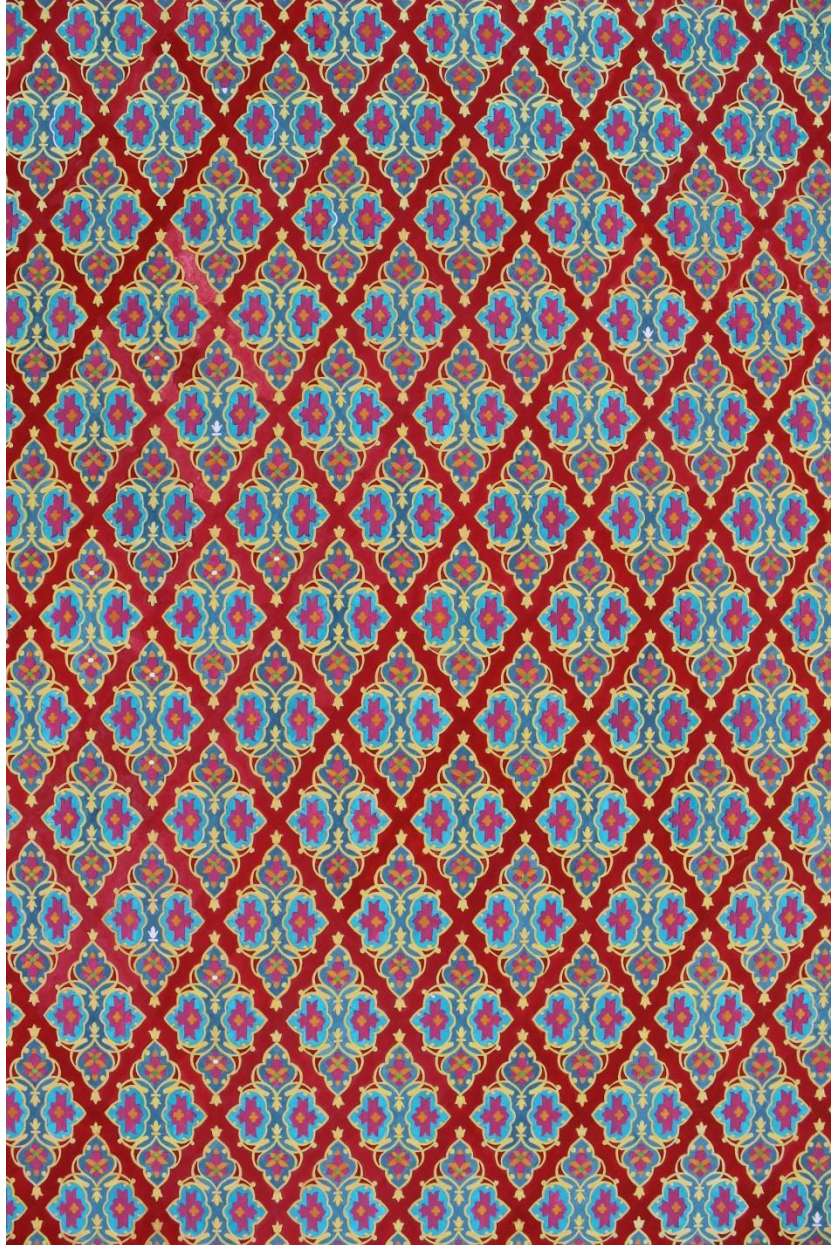


Figure 4

Toranj i, Gouache on paper, 38"x48", 2018



Figure 5

Toranj ii, silver point on titanium, zinc and lead pigments, 38"x48", 2018



Figure 6

Projection, Interactive video installation, dimensions variable, 2019

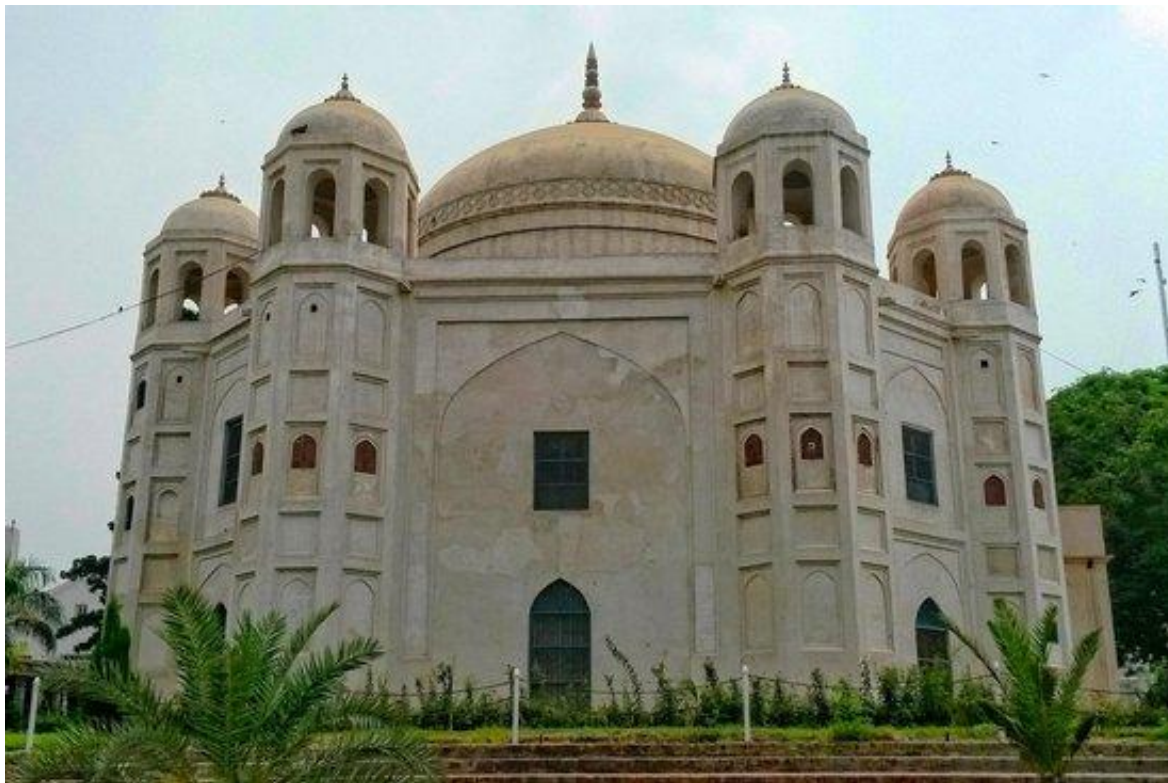


Figure 7

Tomb of Anarkali, source: <https://pakistani.pk/anarkali-tomb/>



Figure 8

White Lie | سفید جھوٹ , two channel video installation, 4 min 10 sec, 2019

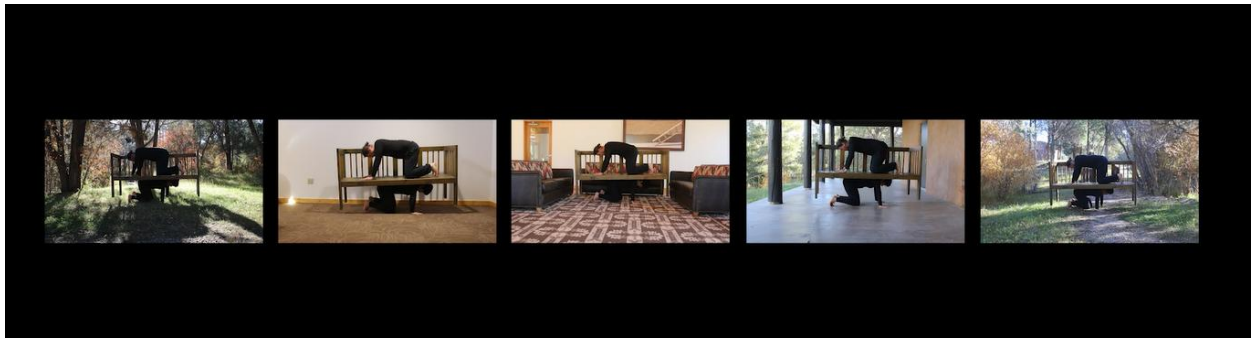


Figure 9

This Bridge Called my Back, five channel video installation, 3 min loop, 2018



Figure 10

The Sun Never Sets, Performance, 2018

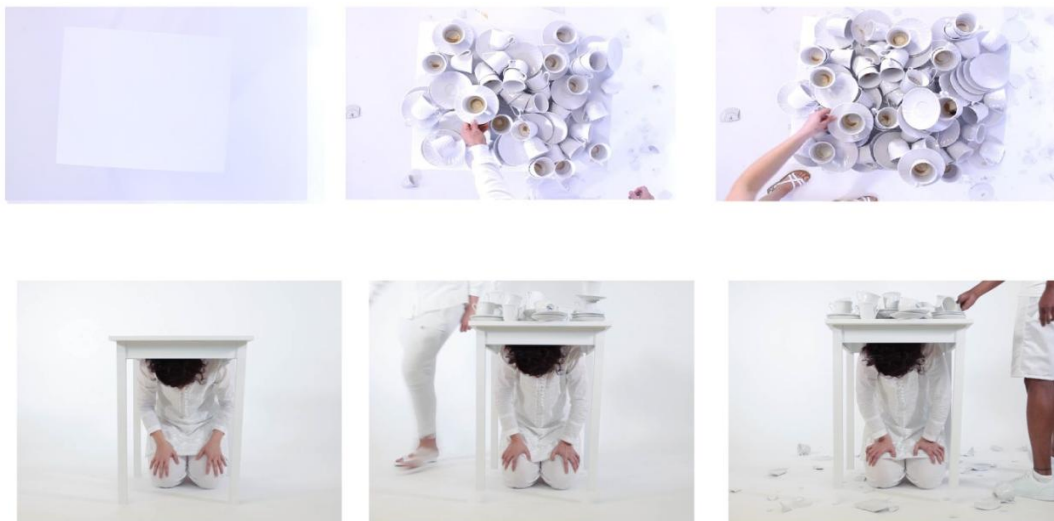


Figure 11

Sight_Plan, two channel video installation, dimensions variable, 10 min, 2019

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